

## **2017 Application for Community Design Charrette**

**This proposal is hereby submitted on behalf of:**

**Wilton, NH Select Board**

**Name of Officer authorized to sign is: Kermit R.  
Williams, Chairman of the Select Board**

**Mailing Address:**

42 Main Street

PO Box 83

Wilton, NH 03086

United States

(603) 654-9451

email: [kermit.williams@gmail.com](mailto:kermit.williams@gmail.com)

Latest Master Plan is 2016-17

### **1.The Community Project**

In the words of our oldest business owner, “Wilton needs a catalyst for community involvement and to create sustainable excitement”. We also need to breathe new life into our business community, which is eclectic, historic and a revolving door of lifestyle small businesses. And our downtown center needs a major make-over. We believe a major revitalization effort that is true to the rural, small town nature of Wilton, is the goal in this compact target “village” area. (See map in separate attachment).

As defined by our Planning Board, the target encompasses residential, commercial, and industrial zones, supports about 1000 of the 3700 residents and most of the retail merchants. It is also the home of the

historic Town Hall Theatre, Wilton Public and Gregg Free Library, the Masonic Lodge, churches, some of the oldest and original residential homes, our public schools, and a cadre of beautiful brick mill buildings that date back to the late 1800s, which now house businesses and artists. This target area municipality also encompasses conservation land, community gardens, our American Legion Post, the fire station, police station and town offices.

The compact Main Street area has “good bones”, but the multi-use buildings, owned either by their merchant proprietors or landlords have tired facades, random signage, and structural challenges.

We have a rich art community, a very good base for building a vibrant town. But you’d never know it because they are all hidden in the mill buildings off Main Street proper with few signs or welcoming doors. We have no street view design of what downtown could look like or a sense of where we could build out additional businesses in a very limited space. Likewise, there are questions about good use of existing structures to provide needed services, gathering spaces, and a sense of place.

Driving down Main Street, you don’t see the river, except for a view from a small bridge that few cross even to find satellite parking a few hundred feet away. So one other goal is to show people a fuller view of their downtown beyond Main Street proper. Several businesses on Main Street, just a half a block down, aren’t viewed as “in town”.

The hope is this community engaged experience can expand horizons about the way residents view their town and instill in all of us a greater sense of pride in our community.



*Wilton sits at the confluence of Stony Brook and the Souhegan River where hydro used to power the mills.*



*Wilton Town Hall and The Town Hall Theatre, which draws audiences from neighboring towns and was the site of the Arts and Film Festival many years back.*



*Clinton Masonic Lodge 52 in Wilton center late is an example of late 1800s architecture and was the first building built for Masons in the state of New Hampshire.*



*Wilton Public and Gregg Free Library has a rich program of events, lectures and children's programs and is one of the most beautiful buildings in town with ornate woodwork, and fireplaces which houses the Wilton Historical Society's display of artifacts.*

## **2. Changes**

The town's population is experiencing flat growth with school registrations down and our retirement community on the rise. But now older residents are finding it difficult to afford their properties when only 30% of our lands contribute to tax revenues. With costs increasing each year, state regulations placing more burdens on towns, infrastructure projects draining operating budgets, and both commercial and residential development stalled, our town is stagnating. Another challenge is attracting visitors to leave the state bypass and drive through town.



Wilton sits between Milford and Peterborough, both much larger and thriving villages with many services. Wilton has been relegated to a drive-through, drive-by town. It has no defined value proposition or distinctive brand. Put simply, we don't know who we are. A design charrette could help us understand our unique brand and articulate a desired end state giving us the basis for more detailed and phased implementation plans.

### **3. Four Distinct Sectors**

#### **Economic**

While basic services like a small grocery store, pub, drug store, etc. are lacking, in a 5-minute walk along Main Street, you can shop antiques, get your hunting license, drop off your dry cleaning, send a FAX, rent a tux, have your hair done, mail a present, buy a house, get your teeth cleaned, eat paella and pizza, and fried clams, sip cappuccino, see a movie, listen to Boston blues bands, grab a good book, crunch on caramel and dark chocolate turtles, register your car, vaccinate your dog, scrap book your heart out, vote, and literally smell the roses at Works of Heart.

We want to take the iconic small businesses from a 250-year-old town and take them into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



*We want to market these small retail businesses that struggle to attract customers.*



*Partial view of Main Street Wilton, looking toward Stony Brook*

The Santander Bank Building has been vacant for 7 years, sitting out a multi-year lease. Its architectural bones are

stunning. Maybe it could be taken back to the raw infrastructure and vault as a two-story open arcade with shops, cafés, artists on display and opened up from Main Street through to the river. Or perhaps we could turn it into a small business tech incubator to support start-ups for those “two guys in a garage” who invent, and collaborate and care more about connectivity than real estate. Can that entrepreneurial spirit that built Wilton – build it again?

### Social

Gathering spots...We simply don't have them, unless you count the Horse Shoe Rapids swimming hole and waterfall that draws 1000s of people from all over the Northeast to swim on private land. We can under-utilized, ugly vacant lot into a charming vest-pocket park with granite benches, offering a gathering spot for regular town events.





*Main Street Park, owned by the Wilton Main Street Association.*

The volunteer firefighters gather at the fire station. The Wilton House of Pizza now serves wine and beer and really good food and their parking lot is full most evenings. A young chef from Peru just opened a tapas bar at his new SkyBridge Café with outdoor tables, where, on occasion, young people can be found sipping cappuccino. Gary's Harvest just opened your basic breakfast and lunch place on Main Street and in only a few weeks has gained a loyal clientele. You can see your neighbors at the Wilton recycling center on Saturdays. And the churches gather

their flocks. But there's no heart beat at the center of civic life.

The Wilton Main Street Association and the Community Center hold events throughout the year from the signature Summerfest to the Teddy Bear Parade. (See Appendix for list of town events.) They create some foot traffic for local merchants but without coordinated hours of operation, those spikes in business do not endure throughout the year.

### Environmental

Stony Brook meets the Souhegan River and runs through the center of town. It's paralleled by the the Boston and Maine railroad which now mostly carry gravel trains, but in the past was also carrying a tourist train.

Wilton is one of the 12 towns in the Souhegan River Watershed. 69% of its roughly 25 square miles are in current use or conservation. However, we don't take any advantage of this precious resource. There's no river walk, or even any basic access to the river, although recent resident surveys showed keen interest in building a walkway and concert gazebo.



*500 residents cast their votes in a low tech survey on November 8<sup>th</sup> after exiting the voting polls.*

We have a warrant article going to town meeting in March to use Cooley Park Trust Funds to restore the lighting and plant trees and put in granite benches and tables along Stony Brook. It's a start with hopes of eventually extending the project to run a boardwalk behind all the Main Street properties. But questions remain: We need to know what that does long term. What's the return on investment for our community? How does it connect to trails? How does it create gathering spots? How does it work with current sidewalks and walking paths? How does it impact the mixed use buildings along Main Street? What does it mean for those property owners and would they invest in

opening the riverside parts of their buildings, building decks, and porches to take advantage of the river views?

### Governance

Like most New Hampshire towns, we are governed by our Select Board with a Town Administrator and department heads, elected officials on boards such as planning, zoning and budget, etc. and ad hoc committees. Running a town with mostly volunteers presents challenges, particularly when the same 30 people are on all of those committees and are reluctant to change. Old thinking sometimes dominates and cost is the driving factor in many discussions and considerations. But we also react to issues and citizen concerns. We don't have a good way to prioritize projects and investments across all our operating entities because we don't know what desired end state we're building toward. We also operate in silos, each department or committee optimizing their own budget to handle their day-to day responsibilities. So sub-optimal temporary solutions often win over what could be smarter, more integrated investments with a longer term return on value. In addition, we don't have a sensing mechanism that alerts us to the next emerging trends in technology, social, health, economics, design, etc. What we need is an operating mindset that helps us build a resilient town that can weather the next economic storms, and take advantage of the next trend rather than be run over by it.

Last September we hired our first Town Administrator. Scott Butcher sits between the Select Board and the department heads directing the more day to day business

of operating the town. Economic development is a primary focus.

2016 master plan vision:

*To remain a small-town that protects its rural environment, historic charm, and natural resources, while promoting opportunity for a variety of residential development and local business opportunities that are compatible and respond to the current needs of the community and support the local economy.*

There are currently seven “vision statements” in the master plan. This one has guided the ECO-DEV Team’s charter and one of our three initiatives:

*To be a Town that supports a climate in which the downtown is thriving, to be a place where visitors seek as a destination, and to enhance the Town as a Gateway to the Monadnock Region, while preserving the character that is strictly unique to Wilton.*

#### **4. Inter-Dependencies**

The target area is at the heart of our social and economic community. It’s the center of our civic lives. Yet, many would say, it’s lost its beat. We know this center would benefit from more support services like a general store, more restaurants, a pub, a community center, and shared workspaces. But the limited real estate makes planning critical. So our plan needs to have creative use of spaces



that allow us to attract new businesses that will both thrive in a town like Wilton and provide the services and shopping our residents need. Our young people need gathering places and recreational activities. This target area could be the trail head for the town's public lands, spider-webbing out from town center to Carnival Hill conservation land, Frog Pond and the Community Gardens.

The neighboring towns of Milford and Peterborough are shopping destinations for most Wilton residents. They are competition for our local merchants and restaurants and another compelling reason to differentiate our town brand.

### **Why do a design charrette now?**

Wilton has a new economic development team focused on three initiatives. First, to diversify the tax base –a complex algorithm that encompasses retaining and expanding existing businesses but also developing a target profile for attracting new ones that support residents' needs for basic services. Second, revitalize our downtown small business community and refresh an aging town center with façade upgrades, signage and new walkable designs and gathering spots and connectors to mill buildings and Main Street properties. Lastly, but related, is a goal to put Wilton on the map as a destination.

Our warrant article, asking for funding for a design charrette has been submitted for our March 16<sup>th</sup> Town

Meeting by our Selectmen and recommended by our budget committee.

We have just completed 45 business surveys as part of **UNH's Cooperative Extension Business Retention and Expansion Program** and will have a final report by March 1st. We have not yet identified the 3-5 projects we'd take on as a result.

**The Safe Routes to School project** will kick off this quarter for Wilton's two public schools which are within walking distance of many residences and are within the target area.

**NRPC** has been awarded a grant to develop their service offerings and is doing a pilot project with Wilton focused on downtown beginning July 1. If awarded this design charrette with Plan NH, NRPC would then take the vision plan and work with us on the feasibility and impact studies, costing and prioritization, leading us to an implementation plan. They also have comprehensive resources and data on Wilton and the region that could be leveraged as part of the Plan NH engagement.

We realize we can accomplish just so much in 2 days. We look forward to your proposal as to what is feasible to get us started and most importantly engage our citizens in what is a long, country road toward prosperity for a very eclectic, historic and beautiful rural NH town.

## Appendix

Summer Fest - The Main Street Association's signature event, held on the last Saturday of June. We close down Main street to traffic, have food and craft vendors, raffles, live music, and dancing in the streets. Drives foot traffic and lures residents and families from surrounding towns. Wilton merchants set up in front of their storefronts with special displays. In the early evening, the action moves to Carnival Hill (Wilton Conservation Commission open land) where you can sled through three towns. There's an 'itty bitty petting zoo' set up by Temple Wilton Community Farm, family friendly, old school games such as three legged races and bean bag tosses, and a pie eating contest, which are sponsored by the Wilton Community Center. Local news papers faithfully cover it as a major photo op. There's more music by a professional DJ for

four hours, and, finally, a fabulous display of fireworks at dusk.

Dinner and a Show – An event of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congregational Church, is a Wilton tradition for over 40 years. We do corny dinner plays, badly acted with town folks, including our own State Representative, Kermit Williams.

Old Home Days – A NH tradition week long celebration from horse shoe tournaments to parades with farm tractors, scout troops and the town's oldest resident is queen or king of the parade held every five years.

Lion's Club Penny Sale -- is just that. A throw back to the days of penny candy and deals. The event drew over 200 people and raised \$8,000 for the Club's scholarship program.

Teddy Bear Parade – sponsored by the Wilton Community Center, this literally is our answer to Madison Avenue's parades. The community builds floats for the bears, people bring their favorites and march down Main Street accompanied by a marching band of kazoos, washboards, and horns. This year's event will coincide with WMSA's downtown Easter Stroll featuring the Easter Bunny at Nelson's Candies, and will include a Teddy Bear Picnic at the Library.

Farm to Table Dinner - Wilton is the oldest CSA in the country, having invented the eat local mantra of today. Within a 2-3-mile radius you have the opportunity to buy

organic pork, chicken, goat's milk, cheeses, vegetables, maple syrup, raw milk, apples, peaches, and more. This event, sponsored by the Community Center, celebrates the town's 250-year-old farming heritage.

The Haunting of Wilton - Wilton loves Halloween! We have resident witches and Full Moon Gatherings. This year, a costumed 5K run that helped raise money for WLC Coop school to add/upgrade lights for their athletic fields, trick or treating at our downtown merchants, pumpkin carving contest, face painting, a spooky scavenger hunt at the Library, Spooky stories in the Main Street Park, a House Decorating Contest, and a lighting of the pumpkins on Main Street, sponsored last year by the Main Street Association.

Deck the Halls - The young families in town really embrace this event. Merchants extend their hours on a Friday night in early December, offering specials. Christmas tree lighting in the Main Street Park with Santa reading 'The Night Before Christmas'. Santa at Nelson's Candies visiting with the children. Indoor Farmers' Market in the Town Hall courtroom, and more vendors outside the Main Street Park. This year - Christmas choirs/caroling from our schools.

Winter Light - Our luminary event done in partnership with WMSA and the Wilton Community Center. The quiet counterpoint to Summer Fest. Upwards of 400 paper bags lined with sand and each containing a lighted candle



(donated by Alene Candles) are placed along Main Street on the Sunday before Christmas. The display stretches from the fire station to the second congregational church, and creeps its way down to Edgewater Estates, our senior housing along the river. This coincides with the showing of the classic movie, 'It's a Wonderful Life', at our Town Hall Theater. The movie is shown every year on that night as a benefit for the Open Cupboard Food Pantry. When the patrons leave the Theater, they are greeted by a magical display of candlelight on one of the darkest nights of the year.

Christmas Store – The Congregational Church pastor was concerned that some people didn't have enough food and started driving to houses with the bounty. The family list got so big, they invited residents in need to come to the store at the church. People come with laundry baskets and leave with free food, toys, gifts, and clothing -- all free.